

# CUE

ART FOUNDATION

Rachel Hooper

## Going Postal: Nostalgia and Indignation in the Art of David Krueger

(An essay on David Krueger's solo exhibition curated by Judy Pfaff  
on view April 24 - May 31, 2008)

To enter David Krueger's room at CUE, you walk through the door of an old-fashioned post office. It was built from memory to replicate the building in the small town of Encinal, TX, where his grandmother served as postmaster. Krueger, born in 1953, vividly recalls traveling into town as a teenager. He would drive past the ranches of southwest Texas to pass the time watching his grandmother sort her neighbors' mail. Thus, the artist invites the viewer to step into his childhood and his nostalgia for a simpler, more innocent time. You can even faintly smell his grandmother's lavender perfume with which he has infused the cardboard he used to construct the installation.

But the devil's in the details of this reminiscence. Once inside, posters and stamps show graphic pictures of anthrax, children shot by assault rifles, the earth scorched by global warming, a denouncement of Fox News and George W. Bush crowned as an idiot king. The shock of stumbling on these disturbing emblems mirrors the artist's own sense that there is a "disconnect between the past 'ideal' and the loss of trust, privacy, and human rights that I see today."

Much like the artists Ed Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, Krueger's first installations were room-size tableaux, which viewers could peer into and see a psychologically charged scene laid out before them. He manipulates all of the senses in his installations, sometimes incorporating fans and scents to fully envelop the viewer in his world. His skillful multisensory illusionism and impact-driven image-making are the result of studying fine arts and painting as well as building installations as a preparator at Rice University Gallery in Houston, TX. An early work was *Bedtime Stories*, shown at the University of Houston in 1998. In this piece, viewers could look through blowing curtains into a bedroom window to see a figure hiding behind the furniture while the yelling and loud banging of a domestic dispute could be heard upstairs. It was what critic Claire Bishop calls a "dream scene," an installation where the viewers' senses are heightened, their experience intensified and their imaginations sent spinning by subconscious symbolism.

A turning point in the artist's work came in 2001 when he participated in a group show, *Street Wars*, that opened on September 15 at the ArtCar Museum in Houston. Although the exhibition was planned months before September 11, the political critiques it contained had an especially powerful sting after the traumatic events of that day. David Krueger was finishing his M.F.A. in painting at the University of Houston at the time, and his installation, *Shadow of Attrition*, focused on family secrets and the interpersonal, domestic wars between parents and their children. He built a 1950s-era sitting room with a table in front of a couch where lay a copy of his grandmother's memoirs in which she describes her father hitting her brother in the head so hard it killed him. Next to the book were letters that Krueger's mother and father had written to each other throughout their passionate and tumultuous relationship, during which they divorced and remarried each other three times.

During the run of the show, the FBI and Secret Service came to the University of Houston and interrogated the art department at length about the meaning and appropriateness of Krueger's work. Having government agents question his artistic intentions made the artist feel censored and heightened his ire toward the ignorance and arrogance he saw in powerful people. He then expanded the examination of violent destruction in his artwork beyond meditations on domestic issues into more of an explicitly political social sculpture. In 2005, he was part of an exhibition at Commerce Street Artists Warehouse, an artist-run space in Houston. There, he presented gifts to the public wrapped in brightly colored paper with interlocking designs. Only upon closer inspection did one notice that the patterns on the paper were digitally constructed from overlapping photos that the artist found on the Internet of soldiers pointing guns at Iraqis, the corpses of civilian casualties of the Iraq war and the fire of exploding bombs. The effect was alarming.

Like his presents, the artist's post office also has a gut-wrenching message. But here, the interactive aspects of the art are taken even further. Like the 1960s Fluxus innovator Robert Watts, Krueger uses stamp machines to disseminate his ideas efficiently in the form of non-mailable stamps. One of his stamps can be purchased from a stamp machine for a dollar. The disturbing images on the stamps are thus a form of culture jamming, using the machinery of the government against its own policies. As the stamps are distributed, so is their message. The artist has said: "What can one person do to make a difference? My answer is, 'Speak up. Communicate in whatever way works best for you, one by one, like these little stamps slowly spreading their message.'"

The images of war, famine, pestilence and death on his postage traumatically sear themselves on our mind and, like the four horsemen of the apocalypse, seem to be harbingers of disaster. Yet Krueger remains hopeful. "I think everyone tries to forget or avoid aspects of life that upset or disturb them and most are more comfortable dealing with things that concern others and not themselves," he explains. "The truth is, however, that those things never go away unless they are addressed. We try to hide what is painful and stressful. I think by trying to break down that barrier, confronting one with a situation that they can identify with on a personal level has the potential to create positive change. It may not be apparent through my work, but at heart I am an optimist. The thing is you have to know the problem to change the problem."

David Krueger unflinchingly exposes us to truths we would rather not see, policies we would rather not acknowledge and wars we would rather not hear about. But it is not all doom and gloom. He involves people in the problems he sees around us as a first step toward creating a more inclusive, more just society. At a time when detached cynicism is the norm, he fearlessly makes art that genuinely seeks to change the outlook of those who see it and perhaps even the world, one person at a time.

*Quotes are from interviews and correspondence with the author.*

**Rachel Hooper**  
**Houston, TX, April 2008**

This essay was written as part of the **Young Art Critics Mentoring Program**, a partnership between AICA USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE Art Foundation, which pairs emerging writers with AICA mentors to produce original essays for loose-leaf insertion into CUE Art Foundation exhibition catalogues. The writer, **Rachel Hooper** is the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Curatorial Fellow at Blaffer Gallery in Houston, TX. She graduated with an M.A. in art history from

Williams College, MA in 2006 before studying in Leipzig, Germany, on a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) fellowship. She was a curatorial fellow at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN in 2006-2007, where she contributed to the catalogues for *Brave New Worlds* (2007) and *Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes* (2008). In addition to writing essays for *SPOT* magazine, Hooper is currently acting as curator for an exhibition of Andy Warhol's photographs (August 2008) and an exhibition and fully-illustrated catalogue with the Center for Land Use Interpretation (January 2009), both at Blaffer Gallery. The mentor, was **Toby Kamps**, who is the senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH). Kamps has organized solo exhibitions by artists like Claes Oldenburg, Ellsworth Kelly, Vanessa Beecroft, Martin Kersels, Adi Nes, Michael Queenland and Torolab, a design collaborative in Tijuana, Mexico, as well as organized thematic survey and catalogue projects, including *Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art*; *Lateral Thinking: Art of the 1990s* and, with a curatorial team, *Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art*. A graduate of the Williams College graduate program in the history of art and the Getty Museum Leadership Institute, Kamps has written on contemporary art and artists for numerous exhibition catalogues and magazines. Before his CAMH appointment, Kamps was senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, OH; director of the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, Portland, ME; and curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, CA.

**AICA (International Association of Art Critics)** was formed in order to revive the critical discourse that had suffered under Fascism and the war, and which was under pressure in nations around the world. It was founded in 1948/1949 in Paris and originally affiliated with UNESCO as an NGO ("non-governmental organization"). At present there are 72 member nations representing more than 4,000 art critics. **AICA USA**, headquartered in New York, is the largest national section, with a membership of over 400 distinguished critics, curators, scholars, and art historians around the country. Please visit [www.aicausa.org](http://www.aicausa.org) for further information.

**CUE Art Foundation** is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit forum for contemporary art and cultural exchange that provides opportunities and resources for under-recognized artists. We value the astonishing diversity of creativity that artists provide and the importance of their activity in the social context of the city. CUE provides artists, students, scholars and art professionals resources at many stages of their careers and creative lives. Our programs include exhibitions, studio residencies, publications, professional development seminars, educational outreach, symposia, readings, concerts and performances. Since 2002, we have operated from our 4,500 square foot storefront venue in the heart of New York's Chelsea Arts District.

Major program support is provided by Accademia Charitable Foundation, Ltd., The Viking Foundation, Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, The Greenwall Foundation, The Foundation for Contemporary Arts, The Joan Mitchell Foundation, Holland & Knight Charitable Foundation, Inc., The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council for the Humanities (a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities), New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts (a State Agency).

New York Council for the Humanities



Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this document do not necessarily represent those of the New York Council for the Humanities or National Endowment for the Humanities.

*No part of this essay can be reproduced in any part without written permission from the author.*

511 WEST 25TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10001  
WWW.CUEARTFOUNDATION.ORG INFO@CUEARTFOUNDATION.ORG